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R&D Chronicles: The Story of Dr. Rivers and the Origin of NAMRU-2 Part III of III

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Adm. Chester Nimitz visits NAMRU-2, Guam, September 17, 1945. Left to right: Cmdr. Francis Schwentker, Capt.

Thomas Rivers, Lt.(j.g.) H.G. Downs, Lt. Norman Stoll, Adm. Chester Nimitz, and Cmdr. H.A. Lamar (behind

Nimitz). Courtesy of the Rockefeller University Archives.

"I want to emphasize here that the Navy took quite a gamble in organizing such a unit. First, no one in the Navy had ever had any previous experience in organizing and running a medical research unit close to the fighting lines; second, no one had the slightest idea whether doctors and scientists could actually do scientific research under military conditions; and third, even if they could do such research, no one knew whether the results they would achieve warranted the existence of such a unit in a military force."

**~Rear Adm. Thomas Milton Rivers, Medical Corps, USNR on the formation of NAMRU-2
(From an oral history with Saul Beniston, published posthumously in 1967)**

News Releases

Identifying the Movement of Malaria Parasites one Region to Another to Mitigate Public Health and Force Health Protection threats

NMRC Researchers Share Findings Identifying a Novel Highly Protective Plasmodium Malaria Antigen

NAMRU-6 Presents Research on the Phylogeography and Phylodynamics of the American-Asian Genotype of Dengue Virus-2

NMRC-A Researchers Present Findings on Surveillance Study for Acute Novel Respiratory Infections at ASTMH 2017

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NMRC Researcher Ties for First at the Armed Forces Open Chess Championship

Naval Medical Research Center NREIP Intern Receives Award at SciX 2017

Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory Research Psychologist Attends the Army Medical Service Corps Junior Officer Week

Top Defense Health Agency R&D Official Visits NHRC

NHRC Celebrates 242nd Marine Corps Birthday

Naval Attachés Learn About Naval Health Research Center's Relentless Pursuit of Readiness

NAMRU-SA Celebrates the U.S. Navy's 242nd Birthday at the Texas Regional Navy Ball

NMRC EDGE Bioinformatics Software Wins Federal Lab Consortium Mid-Continent 2017 Notable Technology Development Award, also Selected as R&D 100 Finalist

NAMRU-SA Researcher Serves as Official USA Archery Judge at Valor Games Southwest

From January 1945—when Thomas Rivers first arrived on Guam—to the end of the war, U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 2 (NAMRU-2) would be anything but underutilized.

Throughout the year, NAMRU-2 field teams deployed to Bougainville, Fiji, Guadalcanal, Kwajalein, Leyte, New Caledonia, Peleliu, Samar, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, and after the war ventured into mainland Japan and China.

In the Philippines, teams targeted the schistosomiasis threat, surveying native snail species, and experimented with new efforts (i.e., application of copper salts) to control disease-carrying snail populations.

On April 1, 1945, a NAMRU-2 field medical team lead by Cmdr. Richard Shope sailed with the invasion forces to Okinawa. The team established mobile laboratories behind fighting lines, searched for schistosomiasis and scrub typhus vectors, and helped minimize malaria and dengue threats. In July, members of the team travelled to the other Ryukyu Islands to investigate a Japanese B encephalitis outbreak localized among natives.

Beginning on May 11, 1945, NAMRU-2 personnel would take part in interrogations of six Japanese Army medical officers captured on Guam. Aside from obtaining vital medical intelligence to support Allied efforts, NAMRU-2 discovered that amebiasis (amebic dysentery) and tuberculosis had been the greatest disease threats to the Japanese warfighter.

At times, NAMRU-2 was even called upon for missions impacting the morale of deployed servicemen. On Ulithi, the unit was asked to investigate why the beer on the island was “undrinkable.” Lt. Cmdr. Kendall Emerson, of the unit’s chemistry department, discovered it rested with the “imperfections in the lining of the cans caused by exposure to heat.”

Tom Rivers stepped down as NAMRU-2’s officer-in-charge January 6, 1946; his departure marked the start of a gradual exodus of the unit’s staff back to the Rockefeller Institute. Once staffed with a complement of over 40 officers and 240 enlisted personnel, NAMRU-2’s numbers dwindled down to just 11 officers and 11 enlisted in 1946.

In January 1946, NAMRU-2 merged with the Navy’s Tropical Medicine School (formerly located at Naval Hospital Treasure Island, California.) to form the Navy Medical Tropical Medical Institute. This new joint facility served as the nucleus of the newly formed Naval Medical Center Guam along with the Naval Hospital Guam (formerly Fleet Hospital 103), the Native Nurse Practitioners School and Guam Memorial Hospital (formerly Fleet Hospital 111).

The Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) leadership examined the possibility of expanding the reach of NAMRU-2 by establishing portable laboratories aboard Landing Ships and carrying out tropical disease investigations on Leyte, Samoa, and the China coast, but in the end this would never come to fruition. In the midst of post-war reductions, NAMRU-2 would ultimately be deactivated on September 3, 1947.

But NAMRU-2’s story did not end with deactivation. Eight years later, in September 1955, the medical unit was re-established on Taipei, Taiwan, under the command of former Rockefeller Institute scientist, Capt. Robert Phillips, Medical Corps, USN. With Phillips at the helm, the new NAMRU-2 would help pioneer glucose-based rehydration therapy in treatment of cholera and send medical teams to the heart of cholera epidemics in Bangkok, Saigon, Manila, and India.

In the succeeding years, NAMRU-2 would establish detachments in Manila, Da Nang and Jakarta. Owing to ever-shifting geo-political situations, NAMRU-2 headquarters relocated from Taipei to Manila in 1979 to Jakarta, Indonesia in 1991, and to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in 2010.

Today, as part of the Naval Medical Research Center-Asia in Singapore and with a detachment in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the legacy of NAMRU-2 lives on today and remains as strong as ever.

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